

Honors 130-009

Conceptions of Self: The American Self through History and Autobiography Spring 2017

Professor Zagarri

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Office hours: Mondays, 1:00-3:00 and by appointment

What were the most important factors shaping American conceptions of self from the Colonial Era through the present? How has the relationship between the individual and the community influenced the notion of American identity? To what extent has the notion of American selfhood changed and to what extent has it stayed the same over time? Through ideas drawn from literature, sociology, psychology, and history, this course will examine a variety of ways in which Americans imagined "the self." The course will explore topics such as the nature of American democracy, the role of slavery and race, the impact of consumerism, the influence of modern medical developments, and the significance of religion, gender, and ethnicity in shaping modern American conceptions of self.

Books (required):

William L. Andrews, ed., *Classic American Autobiographies*

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

Moustafa Bayoumi, *How Does it Feel to Be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America*

Lucy Grealy, *Autobiography of a Face*

Date ***Topics and Assignments***

January 23 **Overview**

January 25 **Who Am I? The Meyers Briggs Test and Modern Conceptions of Selfhood and Identity**

Assignment: Take the test at

<http://www.humanmetrics.com/cgi-win/JTypes2.asp>. Find out what "type" you are, read how the test-makers interpret your results, and be prepared to discuss what you think about the test in class.

January 30 **Self-fashioning in Colonial British America**

February 1 **** Reading and Discussion:** Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* in *Classic American Autobiographies*, pp. 70-228 (**Group A papers due**) (**Blog 1 due for Groups B and C**)

February 6 Individualism and Ambition in the Early Republic

February 8 ** Reading and Discussion: J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, "What is An American?" available at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/crev/letter03.html>; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1831), available at http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/toc_indx.html. Read Vol. II., Section 1, Chapter 8 (How Equality Suggests to Americans the Indefinite Perfectibility of Man); Vol. II, Section 2, Chapter 2 (Of Individualism in Democratic Countries); and Vol. II, Section II, Chapter 13 (Why the Americans Are So Restless in the Midt of their Prosperity) **(Group B papers due) (Blog 2 due for Groups A and C)**

February 13 The Self in Slavery and Freedom

February 15 **Reading and Discussion: Frederick Douglass's *Narrative in Classic American Autobiographies*, pp. 229-327 **(Group C papers due) (Blog 3 due for Groups A and B)**

February 20 Individual Meetings on Autobiography Project

February 22 The Social Construction of Race and Ethnicity in Modern America

February 27 **Reading and Discussion: Coates, *Between the World and Me* **(Group A papers due) (Blog 4 due for Groups B and C)**

March 1 Consumption. Advertising, and the Modern Self

****Reading and Discussion:** Chapter 4, Conspicuous Consumption in Thorstein Veblen, *A Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), (available at http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/VEBLEN/veb_toc.html); "Advertising and the Good Life in a Consumer Society" and April Witt, "Acquiring Minds: Inside America's All Consuming Passion" (Both available on Blackboard) **(Blog 5 for Groups A, B, C)**

AUTOBIOGRAPHY PROPOSAL DUE

March 6 Men, Women, and Gender in American Culture

March 8 **Reading and Discussion: Betty Friedan, "The Problem that has No Name," from *The Feminine Mystique* and "From Rosie the Riveter to the Global Assembly Line: American Women on the World Stage" and "Transgender." from Thomas Solomon, *Far From the Tree* (2012) (all available on Blackboard) **(Blog 6 due for Groups A, B, C)**

March 20 Religion and Identity in American History

- March 22** ****Reading and Discussion:** Bayoumi, *How Does It Feel to be a Problem?* (Group B papers due) (Blog 7 due for Groups A and C)
- March 27** **Memory and Identity**
Film: *Memento*
- March 29** **Discussion of *Memento***
- April 3** **The Body and the Self: The Possibilities and Perils of Medical Technology**
****Reading and Discussion:** Lucy Grealey, *Autobiography of a Face* (Group C papers due) (Blog 8 due for Groups A and B)
- April 5** **Immigration, Ethnicity, and Identity Politics**
****Reading and Discussion:** Hua Hsu, "The End of White America?" (available on Blackboard) (Blog 9 due for Groups A, B, C)
- April 10** **Nature and Nurture/Death, Life, and Identity**
****Reading and Discussion:** Jill Lepore, "The Gate of Heaven" and "Resurrection," in *The Mansion of Happiness* (2012) (available on Blackboard)
- April 12** **Oral presentations on individual projects--peer reviews due**
- April 17** **Oral presentations on individual projects--peer reviews due**
- April 19** **Oral presentations on individual projects--peer reviews due**
- April 24** **Oral presentation on individual projects--peer reviews due**
- April 26** **Oral presentations on individual projects--peer reviews due**
- May 1** **American Identities Now**
****Reading and Discussion:** Peggy Orenstein, "The Way We Live Now: Growing Up on Facebook" and Robert Ferguson, "Alone in the World," and Claude Fisher, "Sweet land of . . . conformity? Americans aren't the rugged individuals we think we are" (all available on Blackboard) (Blog 10 due for Groups A, B, C)
- May 3** **Who are you? Who are we?**
--Take-home Final Exams handed out

FINAL EXAM due by noon on Thursday, May 11 in my mailbox in the History Department office, Robinson B, Third floor. No email exams will be accepted.

Grading

****Participation: class discussion, blogs: 20%**

2 book analyses (3-4 pages each): 30%

Autobiography project (oral presentation + powerpoint + peer reviews): 20%

Comprehensive Final exam (take home): 30%

****Students are expected to do the reading for each class and participate actively in class discussions. In addition, each student will write eight blogs; the lowest two grades will be dropped.**

DROP DEADLINES

If you drop a class by Feb. 13, there is a 33% tuition penalty. THE FINAL DROP DATE is Feb. 24, when there is a 67% tuition liability.

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS

Students who require academic accommodations should contact the Disability Resource Center at (703) 993-2474 who will then be in touch with me.

HONOR CODE

ALL STUDENTS ARE EXPECTED TO ABIDE BY THE UNIVERSITY'S HONOR CODE. Violations of the Honor Code will be brought before the Honor Board for adjudication. For further information, see

<http://gmu.edu/academics/catalog/9798/honorcod.html#code>.